

Community Action For A Community Park

- As early as 1905, neighborhood groups began to push the Essex County Parks Commission for a park, and funds were approved. At that time, Ironbound was the city's industrial area, and many manufacturing factories were located here. It was also home to the area's early immigrants - from Ireland, Italy, and Germany.
- In the early 1900's, Franklin Murphy, owner of the Murphy Varnish Factory in Ironbound, was one of the founding members of the first Essex County Parks Commission. He advocated for Riverbank Park as a recreation space for immigrant workers and their families. Mr. Murphy later became Governor of New Jersey.
- In 1907, land was purchased and a temporary playground was built. After waiting for over a year, Essex County got the last piece of land from the mysterious Anna Ward, the lady who hadn't left her mansion for 35 years, and lived alone with her cats.
- Frederic Law Olmsted's firm designed Riverbank Park to both serve recreational needs and be beautiful. Frederic Olmsted is one of the world's most famous park designers. He designed Central Park in New York City and Branch Brook Park in Newark.
- Riverbank Park was one of the most used in the County, so it needed to be bigger. But in order to expand the park, Essex County had to acquire more land. They bought the land which was formally occupied by the Balbach Smelting Company. From 1926 to 1931 the park was doubled in size to its present 10.77 acre size. The baseball stadium was built in 1930.
- Through the years, each new wave of immigrant populations that arrived in Ironbound used Riverbank Park for recreational activities including: dances, musical performances, sports, playground, relaxation, and even civics classes. For a number of years the primary immigrant groups were from Spain and Portugal. In more recent times, Brazilian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Mexican, Chilean, have called this neighborhood home.
- In 1996 and 1997, led by SPARK (Save the Park At Riverbank), community effort saved the park from threatened development. Remediation and restoration work on the buildings and fields was begun.
- In 1998, Riverbank Park was designated a historic site and added to the National Historic Register.
- In 2003, the park re-opened permanently and new cultural and educational programs were begun by SPARK Friends of Riverbank Park, in cooperation with the Essex County Parks Department.

Riverbank Park is the community's backyard, shared by people of many countries, a place which helps us build bridges to each other, and to our Ironbound home. Those who use the park hold its future in their hands. The park can bring joy to their children and their grandchildren -- if it is cared for. Volunteers are needed to help with the park programs. Please contact SPARK Friends through their website at: www.riverbankpark.org.